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HOW A LANGUAGE-EXPERIENCE PROGRAM WORKS.

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A LANGUAGE-EXPERIENCE PROGRAM INCLUDING SPELLING, LISTENING, READING, WRITING, AND SPEAKING IS DISCUSSED. THE TEACHER HELPS EACH CHILD BECOME INCREASINGLY SENSITIVE TO HIS ENVIRONMENT AND SUCCEED THROUGH A VARIETY OF LANGUAGE EXPERIENCES. TWENTY LANGUAGE EXPERIENCES ARE GROUPED INTO THREE CATEGORIES TO AID THE TEACHER IN SELECTING APPROPRIATE ACTIVITIES. THESE ARE EXTENDING EXPERIENCE TO INCLUDE WORDS, STUDYING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, AND RELATING IDEAS OF AUTHORS TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCE. ACTIVITIES ADAPTED TO LARGE GROUPS, SMALL GROUPS, AND INDIVIDUAL WORK ARE LISTED. TWELVE ADVANTAGES OF A LANGUAGE-EXPERIENCE APPROACH ARE INCLUDED. (BK)

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"How a Language-Experience Program Works"

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What Is a Language-Experience Approach?

A language-experience approach to instruction in beginning reading is one that makes no distinction between the development of reading skills and the development of listening, speaking, spelling, and writing skills. All are considered to be essential in the instructional program and are viewed by teachers as providing reciprocal reinforcement. All facets of language are used as experiences related to the reconstruction of printed materials. All experiences of a child which he can express, especially in oral language, are included as the raw material out of which reading refinement grows. During the instructional program he conceptualizes:

.what I can think about, I can talk about
. what I can say, I can write (or someone can write for me)
.what I can write, I can read
.I can read what others write for me to read.

A language-experience approach recognizes in daily practice that the oral-language background of each child is a basic ingredient in word recognition. As implemented in most programs:

.the thinking of each child is valued, regardless of how limited----------
which leads to
.encouraging each child to express his thinking in many forms, but especially in oral language----------which can be
.represented in written form by a teacher or by the child----------which can be reconstructed (read) by the author and others----------which leads to
.reading the written language of others from a variety of sources----------
which should
.influence the thinking and oral language of the reader so that his spelling, writing, and reading improve.

Each child becomes increasingly sensitive to his environment

The basis of children's oral and written expression is their sensitivity to their environment, especially their language environment, both within the classroom and in the world at large. The continuing responsibility of the teacher is to help children at all levels of ability become increasingly aware of the world in which they live--to "talk" about it in many media and to relate their observations and impressions to their own experiences. They should learn through repeated experiences that our heritage of literature, art, music, and science are the products of men and women who viewed the world with sensitive eyes and ears. For this reason there is a continuing program in a language-experience approach that urges every teacher to

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.read something of children's literature each day
.provide a place for children to express their ideas with art media throughout the school day
.discuss topics of interest with children
.provide a time and place for children to record in writing and in illustrations what they see, hear, discover, taste, smell, feel, imagine
.tell stories from real experiences
.author books which record the real and imaginary experiences of the children of the children in the class.

Children succeed through a variety of experiences

Children's communication skills, including word-recognition skills, are promoted through the use of numerous activities, experiences, and devices. A major goal is that of increasing the chances of success for more children and to do this it is expected that every teacher will know multiple ways of working with individuals. Positive attitudes which result from repeated success are viewed as being as significant as any method or material which might be employed.

The classroom is operated as a language laboratory that extends throughout the day. Language skills are extended and ideas are refined as children listen to stories and recordings, view films and filmstrips, make individual and class books, dictate stories to each other, study words, develop flexibility in using the letters of the alphabet to serve their spelling needs, and begin to record their ideas in writing of their own. They view filmstrips and provide the commentary before listening to the accompanying recording. They view motion picture films with the sound track turned off and discuss their own meanings and interpretations prior to hearing the commentary. They build confidence in the use of their own ability to use language at the same time that they are making progress in recognizing the language of other people-people who are not present but whose ideas have been recorded with writing.

Children have frequent opportunities to read their own writing to the entire class, to small groups within the class, and to other groups in the school. The child who is reading his own writing is using material with a meaning load of zero. Thus, he devotes his energies in oral reading to clarity of expression, effectiveness of presentation, interpretation of punctuation, and other necessary details that make listening to oral reading a pleasure.

Motivation for improving language form and usage comes as children's writing is read by others. Pride in "published" work stimulates the young author to seek language forms that will be understood by others. They are also influenced by what they read and what they hear read to them from hundreds of authors.

As children study the English language--its alphabet, its spelling, its sentence patterns, and the flexibility of meaning in English words--they come to realize that other people use words very much like their own to express ideas. The study of words of high frequency in English to the point of mastering them at sight correctly spelled becomes a meaningful experience.

As children express their own ideas, they are interested in finding out, through reading, what other people think and say about topics of interest to them. Wide reading, in turn, stimulates individual authorship, which is handled in the classroom through a variety of publishing procedures.

Understanding the nature and flexibility of the English language to a degree that one can look at printed symbols and reproduce the language of another person is considered to be a lifelong process. These understandings do not always result from "exercises" in reworking other people's language. They are more likely to develop as a child works with and reworks his own language. As he writes to say something important or interesting to him he is dealing with the language letter-by-letter, word--by-word, and sentence-by-sentence. It is when he has been helped to improve his own language--that which he has constructed--that he makes significant gains in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of that language. Repeated success in this process of writing and refining language gives the child confidence to view reading materials as another person's language. He can approach the act of reading with an attitude of "being able to reproduce the talk of someone who is not present.

Basic Framework of a Language-Experience Approach

Through numerous studies, including the San Diego County Reading Study Project (1958-1967), researchers have identified twenty language experiences which contribute to the balanced development of language skills, including reading skills. These twenty language experiences are grouped in three categories as an aid in helping teachers select activities and materials. In well-planned programs some activities are selected from each category each day and during the progress of several weeks the teacher is careful to choose activities which will extend the learnings in all twenty experiences.

The three major categories with their emphases are:

Group One: Extending experiences to include words--through oral and written sharing of personal experiences, discussing selected topics, listening to and telling stories, writing independently, and making and reading individual books.

Group Two: Studying the English language--through developing an understanding of speaking, writing, and reading relationships, expanding vocabularies, improving personal expression, studying words, and gaining some awareness of the nature of the use of high frequency words and sentence patterns.

Group Three: Relating ideas of authors to personal experiences--through reading whole stories and books, learning to use a variety of printed resources, summarizing, outlining, reading for specific purposes, and determining the validity and reliability of statements found in print.

Resource books for teachers using this basic framework to insure that all three categories are dealt with frequently and that all twenty language experiences are extended through the elementary grades are now available.*

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*Allen, R. V., and Claryce Allen, LANGUAGE EXPERIENCES IN READING, Teacher's Resource Book, Level I, Level II, and Level III. Encyclopaedia Britannica Educational Corp., Chicago.

Flexible Organization is Vital

Learning situations must be designed so that each child can view himself as worthy and able to succeed in reading tasks of increasing difficulty. How a child feels about himself and his relations to others--his family, his teacher, and other members of the class--will determine to a great extent what he is able to say, write and read.

School practices that make reading achievement the measure of success in the early grades, such as grouping techniques that highlight lack of this success, may destroy the child's self-image rather than improve his reading skills. Ability grouping for daily reading instruction can negate any positive attitudes that may be developed in other language experiences. Since every child individualizes his reading whether the teacher wants him to or not, the sensible attitude toward building good learning situations is one that emphasizes each child's success and provides for flexible groupings.

A language-experience approach allows great flexibility in organization and scheduling. The activities are selected to help the teacher use three basic patterns of classroom organization, singly or in combination, depending upon the nature of the work of the day.

1. The teacher, works with the entire class. This arrangement works well for:
   .reading aloud to children
   .children reading their stories or compositions aloud
   .children composing stories orally
   .class discussions on topics of interest
   .extending experiences through films, filmstrips, field trips
   .introducing and playing games
   .singing and rhythms
   .conducting seminars on the development of various skills.

2. The teacher works with small groups:
   .completing activities initiated in the large group
   .taking dictation from one while other observes
   .letting children read their own books as well as those of others
   .giving special instruction in skills to some children identified as needing them
   .playing games to practice skills
   .practicing effective oral reading
   .choosing appropriate books

3. The teacher serves as a resource person for individual and independent activities
   .suggesting ideas for individual books
   .helping with spelling
   .furnishing words for independent readers
   .helping children choose and organize an independent activity
   .conferring about reading and writing progress.

Some Advantages of a Language-Experience Approach

Whether a language-experience approach is used as the major reading program or whether it is used in conjunction with other programs, it has inherent in it certain advantages. Some are:

1. It does not require standard English as a basis for success in the beginning stages. Children whose language is greatly divergent from standard English are not placed at a severe disadvantage. Children who enter school with great fluency do not experience a period of language regression while they take time to develop a small sight vocabulary and learn a few word-recognition skills.

2. It does not require, nor does it recommend ability grouping in the class. Teachers can proceed without administering readiness tests or using valuable time placing children in ability groups which serve a questionable purpose in over-all language development.

3. Materials already available can be used effectively. There is no need for large expenditures for special materials to try to solve reading problems for special groups of children. Basal readers, supplementary readers, recordings, films, filmstrips, trade books, picture sets, children's newspapers, reference materials, and word-study progress can be used to advantage within the basic framework.

4. Children can begin reading using a sight vocabulary which has been developing in their homes and community environment--brand names, labels, signs, and other words seen often on television. To this vocabulary can be added words of high frequency which most children do not develop independently.

5. It allows for the effective use of sides to the teacher-semi-professionals, older children in the school, interested parents, and other volunteers.

6. Team teaching arrangements can be used to great advantage. A division of activities into large and small groups continue through most of the day, thus making maximum use of all team members and their ideas.

7. It is ungraded in the sense that much of the direct language teaching is done with material produced by the children. Each child produces at a level which he can understand and thus he learns to recognize words at his own level. Frustration is avoided. Also, children are helped to choose their own stories and books for independent reading from the beginning. They spend little, if any, time keeping the place while another child reads something which might be too easy or too challenging.

8. Children learn to spell the words of highest frequency at the same time that they learn to recognize them as sight words.

9. Phonics is an integral part of the daily program. Children learn and practice the relationships of sounds they make when they talk and the symbols used to represent the sounds in writing. They view phonics as a natural, normal language experience. They experience the flexibility of sound-symbol relationships in English as a challenge in self-expression. Teachers who wish to reinforce and extend phonics learnings with a more structured program can do so and still use a language-experience approach.

10. Children develop a level of independence in making choices in the daily program which is seldom observed among those who study with highly structured reading programs.

11. The programs requires that all children participate in a variety of expressive activities. What appears to be additional time scheduled for language study includes art, music, dramatization, and rhythmic activities as essential for self-expression of ideas which might later be written and used for reading development.

12. Children choose writing as an independent, recreational activity as often as they choose reading. Self-expression is as important to them as is contact with their ideas and language of other people.

Children who live in a classroom with three major emphases in language development DO have an advantage! They develop desire and resources for self expression; they learn how to study the English language as a lifelong pursuit; they are influenced in their own thinking and their own language by the ideas and language of thousands of authors which they view as friends.